

A 40-year-old social legacy

The PKK through the eyes of its first supporters

Komun Academy

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Forty years ago, on 27th of November, 22 young people founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Fis village of Licê district of Amed (Diyarbakir). Anticipating the 1980 fascist military coup in Turkey, the party's leader Abdullah Öcalan and other members traveled to Rojava on July 2, 1979. The following twenty years that the PKK leadership spent in Syria planted the seeds for the social, political and cultural revolution that we observe in northern and eastern Syria today. Let us hear about the social legacy of Öcalan and the PKK from the witnesses of that period: ordinary civilians, who were the first people to have opened their doors to the revolutionaries and whose lives were to politicize and revolutionize over the decades to come. In particular, the arrival of the PKK marked the beginning of women entering the public sphere to do political work. The women at the forefront of the struggle today say that their women's revolution began with Öcalan's arrival in 1979. Over decades, thousands of women and men from the villages, universities, and toiling masses in the towns, especially youth, joined the PKK from Rojava. Below are testimonies of people from Kobanê and Afrîn, two bastions of resistance in Rojava.

Abdullah Öcalan's first point of arrival in Syria was Kobanê's Kazikan village. One of the women, who embraced the arrivals from northern Kurdistan/Turkey in the village was Emîra Eluş:

"The leader (Abdullah Öcalan) came to our home with one of his friends named Ethem. They told us about their arduous journey by saying, 'We were stuck in a narrow pipe, and would have died unless we left'. Everyone in the village respected him. We knew that he was a good person; however, we didn't know that he was a political leader. At the time, women couldn't go near or sit next to men. So, we watched him from far away. He always read books when he was here. He loved children. Sometimes, he played football with children on Miştenur Hill [the hill on which YPJ commander Arîn Mîrkan detonated herself and turned the tide of the Kobanê battle against ISIS in the favour of the YPG and YPJ in October 2014]. He also attached great importance to women and tried to move women forward. After

a while, he came to our home with a group of friends. There was a woman named Fatma in the group. They stayed here. They didn't eat much. Even when they had toothache, they wouldn't go to see a doctor. They never got in a car. They said, 'We'll get our job done on motorcycle'. Their goal was to liberate Kurdistan."

Once Öcalan and the PKK moved to Damascus, the capital of Syria, Emîra went to visit Öcalan again.

"He told me that Kurdish men are too impatient. I replied to him by saying, 'Our Leader, we, all women, are in prison'. In response to this, he said, 'Get rid of this soil over you. Save yourselves from captivity'. Many times, I was amazed by the ideas of Leader Apo. He would be sitting in one room, but still know what was going on in the other rooms. He had the ability to foresee things ahead of time. I wish I could see him in Kurdistan again. I am sending my warm greetings from here to Imrali prison."

Leader Abdullah Öcalan also stayed in the Elpelûrê village in the house of Şemsê Mihemed for a while:

"We didn't know who he was when he came to our home. We understood that he was an unusual person. I had just given birth to my son Ciwan at the time. Abdullah Öcalan took him on his lap and rocked the cradle many times. He and my brother-in law were always together. He read books everywhere and would spend time with young people. I just want to see him in Kurdistan again."

Another woman, who witnessed the early days, is Hemîde Elûş from Kobanê.

"We first met the party when the cadres started staying in our homes. A friend named Mehmet Sait brought some comrades to our house. He said that a person would come soon from Kazikan village. Tractors had brought the leader near Mekteba Reş, from which they had walked to my cousin's house by foot to avoid drawing attention. At the time, Öcalan was using the name Ali Firat. Apart from Mehmet Sait, who behaved discreetly, nobody knew who Ali Firat really was. At some point, before they left Aleppo, we travelled there to see them. He stayed in Ömer Muhtar's house. In Aleppo, he became increasingly known; people began talking about that this person was Abdullah Öcalan, a leader of the Kurdish people. The society increasingly developed affection for the party. In 1982, I went to Aleppo to see him again in my brother's house. Whenever they stayed in our homes, we would hide them at night. In the early morning, they would leave to the rural areas. When they first came, soldiers raided our house soon after. They had left a cassette on the floor. A solider took the cassette, but because he didn't know what it was, he just threw it on the cradle. My sibling's spouse noticed this and went to put the baby in the cradle. I took the cradle outside, with the cassette and the baby in it."

At first, I heard about them as the 'Apoists'. Later on, people told me that these were members of the PKK. Comrade Zeynep was coming to our house to speak to us. She

asked if I would join the movement. I was engaged at the time. That was the first time when I found out about women being in the movement. We held meetings in people's homes. That is when I saw that women were joining the PKK..."

Ehmedê Pîrê is another witness of the early period of the PKK's efforts in Syria.

"When the comrades came to Kobanê from Bakur (northern Kurdistan/Turkey), they stayed in our house. At first, we thought them to be students. I had a barber's shop in the neighbourhood. We first met there. Eventually, they started telling us that they had founded a Kurdish political party named Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party). With time, we grew close and befriended each other. Later on, we started working for them on the ground. Before we met them, we didn't know that we were Kurds, we had never heard of Kurdistan. We had no idea about politics. We were only attracted to their decency, ethics and manners. Tirelessly, for five, six hours, without taking a break, they would explain Kurdistan and Kurdish history to us. With each day, our affection and attachment towards them increased.

One day, the friends told us that we would go to Aleppo to see Öcalan. We were thrilled. We had never seen a Kurdish leader before. We had heard names, but had never seen any of them among the ordinary people. In 1986, we went to Aleppo to see him in Ömer Muhtar's house. There were people, who had travelled all the way from Afrîn, Kobanê, Cizîrê, and Raqqa. The friends went inside and the leader arrived. We were so excited, we didn't know what to do. For the first time, we saw a Kurdish leader. He spoke to us about Sheikh Said, about the Dersim rebellion, about Qazî Mihemed, about all the Kurdish rebellions and uprisings. He explained that they had formed a party to struggle for the cause of Kurdistan. This gave us high morale. He said that he would enable us to walk towards liberation, towards revolutionary politics. It is true, until this day, it is him, who helps us walk.

One time, all of us had prepared lots of questions for a meeting that we would hold with Öcalan in Aleppo. In his speech, he answered every single one of our concerns and questions. He responded as though he was able to read our minds. After the meeting, we looked at each other in amazement and astonishment. He read our hearts. This is how he was able to connect with so many people. All of his relations developed in this light. It even happened that a spy would sometimes infiltrate, but eventually become his friend. One time, a journalist asked him: 'The more you confront the people, the more they love you. How do you do that?' He responded, saying 'I am only revealing their own reality to the people. I am not doing anything more than that.'

Hemîde Elûş: "He would speak about his childhood very often, about how he went to school and got into fights. One day, he had a fight with a boy in school. He started throwing rocks at the boy, who harassed him and eventually broke the head of seven people, including the teacher's. He told us how his mother Üveyş advised him to never leave revenge to someone else, about how he would run and hide behind his mother, because his father was a poor-fellow. His mother had a great influence on him, impacting his notions of revenge and patriotism. Öcalan would always speak about how the Kurdish people were tried to be annihilated. He spoke about the violation

of our rights and the exploitation of our labour. Our purpose was to enable our people to benefit from their own labour. For this, he said, we needed a free country. One year, we went to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon to participate in the anniversary celebrations of August 15th, the day that the PKK started guerrilla warfare in Turkey. Öcalan held a speech and made sure to devote attention to all of us. We stayed there overnight. Until the sun rose, he walked around, spoke with everyone and looked after each of us individually. He asked about whether everyone had already eaten or whether anyone was hungry. He responded to the questions of the community. ‘Even if my back is facing you, ask me questions, speak to me anyway’, he said. ‘Even if I don’t look at you in any given moment, my ears are still with you’. And really, sometimes hours would go by, but he was never tired of speaking to the people and addressing their concerns. When I look at our revolution today and remember those days, I am not surprised at all. Back then, when there was nothing concrete to be seen yet, I already had faith.”

Ehmedê Pîrê: “One day, there was a meeting in Aleppo. The famous Armenian singer Aram Tigran had come, too. Öcalan loved his voice very much. Aram Tigran was to sing his songs, so we put a couple of chairs next to him. Öcalan came, but didn’t sit there, but with the people. He always made sure not to create or mark any boundaries or distinctions between himself and the people. Every one of his moves were educational for us. There was a people’s assembly in the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy, located in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. As Öcalan spoke, a person from Afrîn asked him about the relations with Hafez al-Assad, the president of Syria at the time. Without hesitation, he responded: ‘Until this second, so far, at this time, the relations are fine. But we can never know what kind of turn politics will take once this second passes by.’”

Fîdan Ebdo is from the Mamela village of Afrîn’s Rajo town, which is currently under Turkish occupation. She met the PKK first in 1988 through her older brother, who studied medicine at the time.

“I started participating in the activities first by working with children. One day, comrade Şîlan Kobanê came to see me. She wanted me to participate in the political work and so I did. After two years of working in the political sphere, in 1993, comrade Şîlan came to me and said: ‘A car will come and bring you somewhere, but you can’t ask about the destination.’ A car parked in front of my house and took me to Hemdaniye. There, we gathered in a hall. A lot of people from the community there. I was the youngest among them. Because I was the smallest, they sat me in the front for better view. We waited for half an hour or so, not knowing who would be leading the meeting. They brought tables and flowers. The atmosphere differed from our usual assemblies. I thought to myself: ‘The leader is here’. Many others in the hall were speculating about the attendance as well. Suddenly, Abdullah Öcalan entered the hall. We were around 40 to 45 people in the hall, all of whom stood up at once. I was overwhelmed with excitement. There was something formidable about him, it would excite you. He carefully looked at everyone in the group. He then saw me, laughed and asked me to come to him. I walked up to him, but my entire body was shaking. I stood a bit far away from him. Again, he asked me to come next to him. He asked why I had come here. When I told him that the comrades had sent me here, he asked me to clarify which comrade. I told him that it had been comrade Meysa (Şîlan Kobanê). ‘Very well, come sit next to me’, he said. ‘It is great that a young girl like you has come here. But why did you come? What attracted you?’ When I responded, ‘We have freedom in the organization’, he asked: ‘How do you know that that is freedom?’ I told him that previously, we could not leave our homes, but since getting to know the party, we started leaving without anyone bothering us about

it. I said that nobody was intervening with our work any more. I mentioned my involvement in children's work, in drama and cultural work, in political and social efforts. He was surprised and asked if I was really doing social work at this age. I confirmed and told him that I would enter society to organize especially young girls and boys. 'Brilliant, that a girl of your age is participating in the efforts at such a level is a remarkable success'. He then addressed the people. During that meeting, Öcalan focused on women's liberation. He asked the women what they had learned from the PKK ever since they first got in touch with the movement. The women responded along the following lines: 'The PKK assured our equal participation in life. But the men still continue their despotic attitudes and approaches towards us. When we have guests, we are not allowed to sit with them. We go and sit in front of the door, as we have no right to sit where men sit. Because we respect the men and because we don't want our homes to break apart, we remain silent.' He responded by saying 'Equality and justice are your rights. You must have your rights in all aspects of life.' He gave the example of comrade Sara (Sakine Cansız). He mentioned the resistance of comrades Kemal Pir, Mazlum Doğan, Hayri Durmuş and all the others in prison and how the enemy tried to use Sakine against the comrades to break their morale, but failed due to her historic and courageous resistance. He said that a people without a homeland cannot resist or be free and that our homeland was Kurdistan. Without a homeland of your own, you will not enjoy any rights, he said. 'The men should not fool themselves, they too have no rights whatsoever. You, the men, are the slaves of the enemy, who go home to be tyrants against women'.

Hesûn Mihemed is also from Afrîn but is registered in Şêrawa's Basilê village. He explains how he first met the party in 1987, mainly through comrades, who have lost their lives ever since.

"One of them was comrade Ikbâl Esvet. He came to our house to see my younger sibling. They would always talk to each other in secret. Whenever we left the room, they resumed their talk. One time I told them to just tell us what they are talking about all the time. They were younger than us and nobody had the courage to speak about such political things at the time. But all of the young ones were already aware of the political mobilization. Later on, we found out that a party had been formed, the PKK, and that Abdullah Öcalan was its leader. This was a new phenomenon for us. We slowly approached this movement and opened up. We read books and began working for the party underground. We participated in such efforts in Aleppo.

In 1993, the comrades came to our house to tell us that an important meeting would be held that we should attend. We left for a big house in Aleppo. Our numbers were high, we were perhaps 30 to 35 people in the living room. All of us, who were present, were doing on-the-ground work. We were wondering who was going to come to the meeting. When someone told us that it would be the leader, we got very excited. I remember that when he entered the room, it felt like our hearts were trying to escape our ribcages! For the first time, we met a leader. This was a very big deal.

In his speech, he spoke for a while about the state of the society. He then mentioned history and the existence of four parts of Kurdistan, but he mostly spoke about northern Kurdistan, because that is the biggest part of Kurdistan and the main efforts of the party were being led from there. He explained to us the level of the efforts in the North, about how our work here was contributing to the struggle over there. He

explained why we were leading such a struggle in northern Kurdistan, about the calculations of the enemy. ‘If the northern part gets liberated, the liberation of Rojava will be easier, because the biggest part of Kurdistan will be free by then, which will enable the smaller part to move more steadily towards freedom’, he believed at the time. There were certain slogans at the time. He said that we ought to mobilize with sacrifice and determination for the liberation of our country.”

Fidan Ebdo: “Concerning the state, Öcalan had made the following analysis at the time: ‘In the small South [translator’s note: at the time, Rojava was often referred to as the smaller part of South Kurdistan], the state has taken over everything, so that nobody says ‘I am a Kurd’ any longer. Those who do claim their identity are thrown in jail.’ The meeting lasted more than two hours, after which we left. Before we said our farewells however, Öcalan said something that is still on my mind to this day. I was only 14 years old at the time, but I still remember his words as though I had heard them only yesterday: ‘The day will come that blood will reach up to our knees in the small South’. All of us were surprised about why he would say such a thing. People looked at each other. How could it be? Nothing is happening here, people would say, we are all occupying ourselves with our work. ‘Maybe you will forget’, he said and then, turning around to point at me: ‘...but this girl will not forget’.

I saw him six times in total. One day comrade Şilan said to me again: ‘We will go somewhere, but it’s quite far. Would you like to come along?’ Of course, I said yes. I had a younger brother, whom I took with me on the journey with the comrades. We travelled all the way to the border to Lebanon. The state didn’t permit us passage, because we didn’t have any IDs. We, however, were determined to go. For the first time, I experienced myself as being so determined and strong. I believe that I must have felt empowered by the leader. A taxi approached, and the driver asked us where we were going. When we told him that we were on our way to the camp, he told us that he would take us, but that we would have to climb upwards immediately after he would drop us off. Before we got out of the car, the driver told us the spot from which we needed to walk up. I tied my brother to my back and ran up the hill as soon as the taxi stopped. Once I reached the heights, I saw the flags of the PKK. It was a beautiful moment. It was the first time we saw PKK flags blowing in the wind of mountains.

At that meeting, he spoke mainly about the preparations for August 15th. The next day, we held the celebrations for the anniversary of the shooting of the first bullet. Öcalan stood on a rock, the comrades stood in the field in a militant fashion. The people sat around the comrades. The leader saluted the people, thanked them. Really, the people were full of morale. He spoke for two hours, after which the people were competing to take photos with him. The majority of the people had travelled illegally to get there. The group before us had been arrested. The friends had told us to come by foot, not by car, since the state had blocked the road. But the people didn’t care. They thought ‘Who cares about the Syrian regime and what it will do. We saw our leader after all!’ The fact that the group before us had been arrested didn’t bother us or our enthusiasm. The people had brought many things with them, photos of the leader or flags.

Years went by, I was working in the sphere of culture then. The friends said that an assembly would take place. So, we went to a place in Shaikh Maqsoud. It was not a very big house. There, the leader spoke to us about culture, about how to protect, defend, and know our culture. He also spoke to us about the importance of how to present ourselves, how to act and address the society. We needed to be like friends, he said. Even when making a joke, it had to be in a cultured,

respectful way. I saw the leadership several more times again, the last time being in the year of 1998. That last time, I couldn't stay for too long. Öcalan had given me a task, which is why I went to see him and returned quickly. After that, he left Syria anyway. I had sent him a letter at the time, but that letter never reached him and returned to me. I have kept the letter ever since."

Hesûn Mihemed: "Among the leadership's words was one saying that drew much of our attention. He said 'We work as though we are digging a hole with a needle.' Indeed, after all these years, we understood the meaning of these words by living them through our experience. Today, we are drinking water from this hole that was dug with a needle. We must appreciate the value of all these decades-old values, live up to them, do them justice. If we have shortcomings, we must be aware that these are shortcomings vis-à-vis humanity and our martyrs.

Öcalan always said to us that our revolution was a humanity revolution. Our struggle was not just for one society or only for our nation. He said that that we needed to seize our historic opportunities as the Kurdish people and fight against the policies of annihilation and extinction that surround us. At the time, nothing was left to represent the Kurdish people in society. Our dignity was trampled upon. However, even if one last clean hair had remained, we succeeded in pulling humanity out of the dirt and state of fallenness and turned people into sacrificial, revolutionary heroes. As a result, the Kurdish people's freedom struggle enjoys respect around the world today.

When we look at our situation today, we can see that the things that Öcalan said decades ago remarkably resonate with current developments. As a party, the PKK represents humanity today. It has proven itself as a pioneering force of the Middle East. Before we met the PKK, we didn't really have any such dreams and ideals. Many parties had arisen in Kurdistan over time, but none of them had achieved anything meaningful on a greater scale. But in his perspectives, Öcalan always spoke of the future. What would our future be like? What needed to be done and how? The developments increasingly made us feel that our dreams could actually be possible. For example, an army was formed, the guerrilla developed, the people mobilized around the leadership and the movement. All of this naturally showed us that our ideals can be realized through struggle. Things that Öcalan spoke about decades ago have actually come true today. But back in those day, it was hard to imagine that our efforts would ever reach such a stage."

Hemîde Elûş: "We knew about the situation when Öcalan wanted to leave for Europe. We were following the developments. Two days before his arrest, I had a dream and told my husband. A couple of days later, I saw him cry in front of the TV; our leader had been kidnapped. It was a dark day and it always will be. My son's birthday is February 15th, we were preparing to celebrate. But because Öcalan was taken hostage that day, we stopped celebrating his birthday ever since. We will celebrate again, when he returns to his freedom..."

Ehmedê Pirê: "Once again, we congratulate our people on the anniversary of the PKK and call on them to claim this struggle through mobilization. If the enemy claims it will eradicate the PKK, our people must show an even greater will to defend this movement and its values. With these feelings, I congratulate the leadership, our fighters, our comrades in prison and our entire population on the anniversary of our party's foundation."

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